The Fourth Church Pulpit

SIMEON'S SIGH

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Luke 2:22-35

Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, . . . for my eyes have seen your salvation.
Luke 2:29-30 (NRSV)

I have concluded that we have not completed our Christmas celebration until we perform one final ritual. For some, this ritual happens on Christmas Eve when sitting in the darkened Sanctuary for the eleven o'clock p.m. service, you realize that you have done everything you can do: the post office is not processing any more packages or cards; the stores are closed; and it's too late to bake any more cookies. All there is left to do is sigh. It could be a sigh of contentment and satisfaction; could be a sigh of weary relief; it probably is a little of each.

For others it happens on Christmas Day at about 1:45 p.m. when all the packages have been opened, or at 7:15 p.m. when the meal is over and dishes done.

For others, today is the day to celebrate the successful conclusion, not of Christmas — that ought to go on a bit — but at least the end of the rush and push.

So, join me please in this important ritual. On a count of three: on two, inhale; on three, exhale. The Christmas Sigh.

We have such a lot invested, after all, emotionally, physically and financially. We have such high hopes and expectations of Christmas: too high the therapists tell us, with the result that the stresses and strains we cope with for eleven months of the year feel unbearable as Christmas approaches. There's something about the season that makes difficult family relationships, for instance, even more difficult. It's as if the volume is turned up too high emotionally.

Psychologist Thomas Holmes developed a Stress Scale, based on an assigned numerical value of stress .oducing experiences, usually changes . . . loss of job, moving to a new city, a new relationship. Christmas, Dr. Holmes decided, not a particularly difficult Christmas, simply living through December 25 in this culture, earns a hefty fourteen stress points.

A writer by the name of Bridget Kuhns took Dr. Holmes' scale and applied it to the Virgin Mary, and wrote a very amusing essay which a friend sent to me.

Dr. Holmes calculated that any pregnancy earns 40 points: an unwanted pregnancy, add 20 more. A change in living conditions — 25. (Mary stayed three months with Elizabeth.) A marriage to Joseph: 50 points. A change in financial status: 38 points.

Surely there must have been words between them when she discovered that he had not made reservations at the Inn: 35 points for an argument with a spouse.

And then the birth — 39 points: 16 for a change in sleeping habits: 15 for a change in eating habits.

Not to mention all those uninvited guests: shepherds and angels coming and going, and three Kings from the East.

Dr. Holmes says that people get sick at 200 points. Ms. Kuhns calculates that Mary's ordeal earned her "stressed out" status at 424, a record.

More seriously and elegantly, W. H. Auden has written about the stresses and the equivalent of the Christmas sigh in his *Christmas Oratorio, For the Time Being.*

"Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into the cardboard boxes . . .
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week.
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
stayed up so late, attempted - quite unsuccessfully —
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers."

One of the loveliest Christmas sighs, and one of my favorite incidents in the Bible, happens when Mary and Joseph take their six-week old baby to Jerusalem, to the Temple. They are there for two reasons: Mary's purification and Jesus' consecration.

A Jewish woman had to present herself to a priest in the Temple forty days after she had given birth and make a sacrifice of a lamb and a pigeon, or in hardship cases, two pigeons, which were on sale there. And, first born males belonged to God in Israel since the days of the Passover, and so the parents came to the Temple to make an offering, to redeem back their infant son — five shekels. I mused that with a growing pigeon nuisance in the Garth and a Capital Funds Campaign in progress, a similar arrangement might have some appeal here. . . .

In any event, Mary and Joseph are met in the Temple outer court by two very interesting older adults, a man by the name of Simeon and a woman by the name of Anna. They are two of my favorite characters. They are devout: they spend most of their time around the Temple, attending worship, praying, maybe helping out as volunteers. Every congregation has to have a few Simeons and Annas. James Forbes, pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, says that in the African American Pentecostal Church of his youth, there were always "Church Mothers," women of enormous influence who presided over the congregation and were consulted on every matter of importance.

That's who Simeon and Anna are. "Simeon receives the infant Jesus into his bent arms," is how the Greek reads. That is, Simeon cradles the child. What a moment it is when the new baby is introduced and the church mothers or fathers hold the child and "ooh and aah" and compliment the parents. What a moment when a grandparent sees for the first time a new granddaughter or grandson. There are important theological and ecclesiastical reasons why we Presbyterians baptize infants always in the context of public worship. And there are important psychological and emotional and spiritual things happening as the minister, acting on behalf of the whole congregation, cradles a child and pours water and prays and blesses and then physically carries the infant into the congregation so that all present can cradle the child for a moment.

What a moment when Simeon cradles the child Jesus and sighs his Christmas sigh:

> "Master, you are dismissing your servant in peace . . . for my eyes have seen your salvation."

The older version is more graceful.

> "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace . . . for mine eyes have seen thy salvation."

Every day since the Fifth Century, that lovely canticle of Simeon's has been prayed in monasteries throughout the world.

What do you suppose Simeon saw when he cradled the child?

The baby himself was the first thing he saw. And babies, as we all know, have a way of seizing the agenda, commanding and receiving full attention. But I think it was more than cuteness that Simeon saw. It was something akin to hope, the future, possibility. William Willimon, chaplain at Duke, observes, reflecting on his own young family:

> "Somewhere within our deepest selves, we know that we need babies. Some deep human instinct tells us that babies are a sign of our human creativity at its best." [*On A Wild And Windy Mountain*, p. 26]

When he cradled the child in his arms, Simeon, I think, saw hope. It happens often. I read a book last fall that for me became a textbook in authentic hope. The Hyde Park Bank in Chicago came up with a terrific marketing idea recently. The executives wanted a public relations brochure that would describe the bank's community reinvestment program. So they had an agency create a lively poster to be displayed in the schools, inviting children to submit pictures and essays on the topic, "My Neighborhood." The winning entries would be used in the bank's brochure. The bank president says, "The responses we received stunned us." The bank expected "brightly colored, childish drawings of trees and houses, and funny little stories about the postman and the people on the block." The first essay submitted was by an eight year-old, Gail Whitmore. Her first sentence indicated that the project was going in a different direction than the one the bank intended.

> "In my neighborhood," Gail wrote, "there is a lot of shooting and three people got shot."

> "Hello, my name is Charlie. I live in a slum. Some people call it hell on earth and so do I." Charlie is twelve.

The pictures are deceptively innocent.

> "In colorful pictures of buildings and trees and kids playing, one might see, on closer look, people shooting at each other, or a drug deal . . . two bright suns are shining over a playground with smiling people, one of whom is shooting a gun."

There were 915 murders in Chicago last year, seventy per cent of which were committed with handguns. In 1993 sixty children have been murdered. By the time they are five years old, the majority of the children of the inner city will have had some personal encounter with handgun violence. [See *Children In Danger*, Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, and Pardo] Birthdays for these children are noted, *not* by the phrase, "He turned ten," but by "He made ten."

The pictures and essays are published in a fine little book, *My Neighborhood* by Linda Waldman. And to read it, I found, is profoundly moving and disturbing but ultimately inspiring, because somehow, in spite of all they have seen and experienced, these kids are full of hope: not despair, cynicism, but hope. Charlie Williams who knows that he lives in hell on earth concludes his essay,

> "People say my area is the worst place on earth, but I'm surviving. I have a roof over my head, a bed to sleep in, a T.V. of my own and a nice family."

When Simeon held a newborn in his arms he experienced hope — for his own society, his people, for the gentiles — hope for the future in a child. That has a way of happening when you hold a baby. And he saw something else. He saw challenge, controversy, confrontation. He saw more than baby cuteness. He saw that truth demands a decision: that hope in action is always a little revolutionary, always working for change, that this child, this project, would forever bring to a crisis point the most important matter in every life — the matter of God. This child would bring theology into life: out of abstraction and into everydayness, out of the classroom and the dreamy reveries of the mystics and into the marketplace and courtroom and boardroom. And he saw the cost: that the child's mother would experience pain more severe than any pain, when a child suffers and dies.

And Simeon saw something new; something he had not thought of before; the vulnerability of God. Everybody expected Israel's salvation and everybody knew what it would look like: a mighty warrior who would gather forces, inspire the troops and throw off the humiliating yoke of Roman occupation. Salvation in this helpless child?

Hope in weakness, the vulnerability of God is a new idea. God subject to the limitations, finiteness of human life; God who actually loves, cares about human beings; God's salvation in the helpless child, is the startling new thought Simeon had as he cradled the baby and the central notion of Christianity. Think of the great wisdom of that. You and I come to faith with our intellectual guard up, not wanting to believe much, not wanting to be challenged: and with our spiritual guard up, not wanting to be affected too deeply, not wanting to be asked to change, to give more our ourselves, not wanting to be moved too passionately. And here comes God in a way guaranteed to cut through all that, in a way we can hardly resist, a gentle newborn child. God coming in love and asking only that of us — love for God, love for the world, love for one another, love for the child.

And Simeon saw something that addressed him very personally: his own consolation, comfort, assurance, freedom from fear, his own salvation. How often that consolation happens in connection with a child, doesn't it? The mother of a friend of mine, critically ill in Florida with heart failure, holds on and on, for days, until the last of her children arrives, and then lets it go and dies.

"O Lord, lettest thou thy servant depart in peace."

A great-grandmother who has never seen her great-granddaughter, lies in her hospital bed, barely conscious and when the six month-old is placed on the bed beside her, smiles without opening her eyes, reaches out and pats the baby's arm and then a few hours later, breathes her last.

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace."

That, too, I believe, is what Simeon saw.

Frederick Buechner writes that even though we are past the childish excitement and eager anticipation of Christmas, no matter how old we are, we still watch and wait for that child. Buechner writes,

> "I suspect that the innermost truth about who we are as human beings is that even at our most jaded, even when we're least conscious of it, we wait and watch."
> [*The Clown in the Belfry,* p. 125]

For what? For consolation and comfort to use Luke's words . . . for salvation and light and revelation . . . to use Simeon's words.

For God to come to us with healing in his wings; for tidings of comfort and joy; for some sense that we are loved and embraced by God and forever and ever safe in God's love.

Waiting . . . watching . . . for a child, a little baby, and for that sigh . . . that glorious affirmation, cradling the child of Bethlehem in our arms. . . .

> "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace . . . for mine eyes have seen thy salvation."

Amen.